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John Buchanan
An Ecumenical Christian Century

It must have been an extraordinary time to be alive as the 19th century gave way to the 20th. Karen Armstrong nicely characterizes the beginning of the 20th Century in her book, *The Case for God*, by telling about the confident optimism, the cheerful buoyancy of the Second International Congress of Mathematicians which convened in Paris in 1900. German mathematician David Hilbert stood up and announced that there were just twenty-three outstanding problems in the Newtonian system, and once these twenty-three remaining puzzles were solved, we would pretty much know everything there is to know about the universe. Hilbert went on to predict a century of unparalleled scientific progress. Permanent peace and prosperity seemed to be within reach. There appeared to be no limit to what human beings could and would accomplish.

Virginia Woolf visited an exhibit of post-impressionist paintings and wrote: "In or about December, 1910, human nature changed."[1]

That same year, 1910, a World Missionary Conference was convened in Edinburgh. 1,200 delegates from around the world gathered to talk about interchurch collaboration in the global missionary enterprise. The chairperson was John R. Mott. Among the distinguished delegates were Lord Balfour, The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Jennings Bryan who spoke eloquently about global education as part of the mission project. Bryan, years before his humiliation and tragic demise in a small Tennessee Courtroom, was so good he combined a speaking tour of Scotland with his service at the Conference.

Also present was Robert E. Speer, one of the saints of my denomination; the President of Doshisha University in Japan, Tasuku Harada; Sherwood Eddy; the Bishop of the Church of Sweden. Taking it all in, as well, was a 36-year-old American delegate, a minister in the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, Charles Clayton Morrison. Two years earlier he had purchased a floundering journal, *The Christian Century*, and, as he put it, "re-founded it." He wired back to Chicago an editorial, published on July 7, 1910, in which he described sitting in the drawing room of his host - the 1,200 delegates were housed in Edinburgh homes - taking tea - he was a tea-totaller, his host saying that the conference was "about the biggest

[1] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (place: publisher, date), 262.

thing that ever struck Scotland." In fact, Morrison reported that the Archbishop of Canterbury looked around at the assembly and observed, "If men be weighted rather than counted, this assemblage has, I suppose, no parallel in the history of this or other lands."

The conference identified sectarian division among Christians as the most formidable obstacle to the advancement of the Christian Gospel globally. Hope and optimism ran high. Morrison wrote: "Everyone feels the presence of a power, not ourselves, deeper than our own devices, which is making for a triumphant advance of Christianity abroad . . . the delegates are thrilled by the sense that the conference foreshadows a new era for the church at home."

He concluded: "The theme of Christian unity is running through the whole conference like a subterranean stream. It breaks through the ground of any subject the conference may be considering, and bubbles on the surface for a time. It is almost the exception for a speaker to sit down without deploring our divisions. The missionaries are literally plaintive in their appeal that the church of Christ re-establish her long lost unity."[2]

It is perhaps not possible for us to recapture the optimism and hope of the first decade of the twentieth century. Developments in physics, biology, mathematics would make human life better, healthier, more free than it had ever been. Modern transport would bring the nations of the world closer to one another and, therefore, more inclined to be peaceful. Christianity, with a new vision of its power represented by ecumenism, reflected the general confidence by setting itself to the goal of actualizing the Kingdom of God on earth – and the world for Christ in our time.

One of the later editors of Morrison's magazine wrote about that era: "Protestants tiring of provincialism; churches breaking out of sectarian isolation. Scholars were beginning to speak the truth concerning history and the composition of the Bible, liberating some churches from literalism. Burgeoning industrialization had become so oppressive that the nation's conscience was hurting. Labor was stirring. Suffragettes were marching. Pioneer sociologists were uncovering the shame of city slum and the disgrace of child labor. Proposals to prohibit manufacture and sale of liquor were discussed and widely supported. The political arena was alive with humanitarian issues."[3]

The Christian Century was born at a time when thoughtful people believed that they were living at the beginning of it – The Christian Century.

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[2] *The Christian Century*, July 7, 1910, reprinted July 4-11, 1984.

[3] Harold Fey, *Seventy Years of the Century*.

The magazine was actually founded in 1884 as *The Christian Oracle* – a name someone quipped recently is actually worse than Christian Century. It was a Disciples of Christ journal, renamed itself *The Christian Century* in 1900, floundered, was in mortgage foreclosure when Morrison bought it for $1,500 from a Publishing Broker in Chicago. He ran it as a for-profit corporation until his retirement in 1947.

His magazine became an eloquent voice for the Social Gospel. Wikipedia says we are "considered the flagship magazine of mainline Protestantism." We describe ourselves this way: "For decades *The Christian Century* has informed and shaped mainline Christianity. Committed to 'thinking critically and living faithfully,' the magazine explores through argument and reflection what it means to believe and live out the Christian Faith in our time. As a voice of 'generous orthodoxy' the Century is both loyal to the church and open to the world."

Our voice has been important enough in the culture of American Religion that two other journals were founded in disagreement with us: *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christianity Today.* We have never been large – 45,000 was the biggest our subscription list ever was. Mostly we have been in the mid 30,000s. But we have been read by academics and pastors, evangelicals who we have infuriated with our liberal positions, and liberals who we have enraged by our not being liberal enough. One President read us and reads us still, I believe – Jimmy Carter and the legendary longtime North Carolina Tar Heels basketball coach, Dean Smith. (My secret goal is to get the magazine in the hands of the Ricketts family, the new owners of the Chicago Cubs – who could use a little divine assistance.)

Contributors over the years have included: Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Gerald Ford, Martin Luther King, Jr, Nelson Rockefeller, Walter Reuther, Karl Menninger, Robert Kennedy – and Spiro Agnew (not on my watch).

The Christian Century reported on, analyzed, advocated for the issues that have characterized the age and compelled the conscience of the churches. On the topic of war *The Christian Century*, in its early years, advocated political action to outlaw war and Morrison, so prominent in the peace movement, was invited to Paris to witness the signing of an international treaty, during the 1920s, to abolish war. Unfortunately, it had no provision for enforcement. As war threatened again in the 1930s Morrison, who was not quite a pacifist (he called himself a "pragmatic non-interventionist") wrote consistently and powerfully against war and preparation for war. Only after Pearl Harbor did he change his mind, and then only reluctantly. He called the Second World War an "Unnecessary Necessity."

It was the subject of increasing tension with Reinhold Niebuhr, a contributing editor and one of the magazine's most important and popular writers. Niebuhr's Christian Realism required resisting evil, by force, if necessary. He became so irritated with Morrison's "pragmatic non-interventionism" that he broke with the magazine in February of 1941, removed his name from the masthead, and launched his own magazine, *Christianity and Crisis*. It took years for the breach to heal, but eventually it did and Niebuhr resumed writing for *The Century*.

Niebuhr also disagreed with Morrison over Prohibition. Morrison was a tea-totaller and was an avid proponent of Prohibition. Niebuhr, with perhaps a truer sense of humanity, thought it was all a big mistake. On another occasion Morrison tried to organize a movement simply to discuss important issues without becoming political. Niebuhr called it "pure moonshine."

The magazine took up the cause of organized labor, child labor, universal suffrage, Native American rights and during the war launched a crusade against the internment of Japanese Americans.

After the war *The Christian Century*, with Kyle Haselden as editor, focused on Civil Rights, advocating for equal rights for all Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to be a contributing editor and submitted articles. When he wrote *A Letter from the Birmingham Jail*-to white ministers in Birmingham who had asked him to have patience and not push so hard for change – he sent it to *The Christian Century* which was first to publish it in its entirety. In fact Dean Peerman, who graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1959, went to work for *The Century* that year and is still in his office, using his manual Olympia typewriter, edited King's letter. Dean Peerman and Martin Marty marched together at Selma and came home and wrote about it powerfully in the magazine.

The Christian Century has ventured out into the dangerous field of national politics on occasion, particularly with the resurgence of political conservatism in the Republican Party which seemed to *Century* editors as unfortunate and unhelpful and not consistent with the deepest Christian values and hopes. Editor Kyle Haselden felt compelled to express his criticism of the Republican Presidential Candidate's positions which he did in an editorial entitled "Goldwater, No." He retired shortly thereafter and his successor, Alan Geyer, felt that he couldn't just let that hang out there so he wrote the counterpoint: "Johnson, Yes." The IRS was alerted by none other than Billy James Hargis of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, which had recently lost its tax exempt status. The IRS agreed and for several years the magazine operated without tax exemption.

All the while *The Century* was a consistent voice for ecumenism, reflecting Morrison's 1910 experience in Edinburgh. He personally reported on the Federal Council of Churches and the magazine applauded, reported on and supported the New National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches.

We are in a very different place now. The decline of the mainline churches in North America is so studied, lamented, observed and exegeted as almost to be a cliché. No one knows that more than this Presbyterian who can remember when we made news when our Stated Clerk, Eugene Carson Blake, appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine with Episcopal Bishop James Pike at the launch of what became the Consultation on Church Union.

It is documented thoroughly and eloquently. Douglas John Hall calls it the end of Christendom and it surely is that. Hall also says it is the opportunity for the church to find itself.

Martin Marty traces the side-lining of the Colonial Big Three as America has diversified and urges us not to abandon who we are and what we do best, build community, educate for human rights, and advocate for the environment under assault.[4]

Phyllis Tickle uses the image of an every-five-hundred-year rummage sale in a way that is both encouraging and frightening. Encouraging because the result is always something new and better and more faithful; and a reconstituted older form of the church that is now leaner, more viable, and more faithful. And, says Tickle, the faith always spreads dramatically. We're in the middle of a rummage sale she says. It's frightening if you worry or suspect that your traditions and practices might be among the items pulled out of the attic and unceremoniously dumped.[5]

The Christian Century's response to this new place in which we find ourselves, is to invest a little more energy and attention in congregations where Christian faith is taught and nurtured and where discipleship is shaped and formed and where pastors lead. My hope is that *The Christian Century* will continue to be an irreplaceable resource to congregations struggling to be faithful, sometimes against very difficult odds and pastors who lead and who must stand up before congregations every week, in these daunting times, and say something faithful and useful. And to do that

[4] See *The Protestant Voices for American Pluralism*

[5] See *The Great Emergence-How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books

without losing the prophetic edginess, the thoughtful cultural and political critique that we continue to believe is a unique and important and maybe life saving role to play.

I was asked to look both backward and forward - as you begin this important time together. There are many, many, many people, more expert than I am, many of them in this room. What I do, in addition to overseeing *The Christian Century*, and have done since 1963 is preach weekly, and lead a congregation, insofar as a congregation can be led, and live with and attempt to be a pastor to people who themselves are trying to live faithful and meaningful lives.

I don't know what kind of church is coming, or emerging, if you will. But I think I see a few hints and have a few ideas. I have five adult, married children, and thirteen grandchildren, all of them attending and participating in churches - two families currently becoming a little disillusioned with their church - because it will not welcome a daughter, a sister because of her sexual orientation. I pray every day that we won't lose them, that they won't give up on the church. When my children know that I've been to yet another meeting to discuss strategy for dealing with this issue they say, "Dad, are you still talking about that? Don't you know that the world has moved on?"

Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us* gave me a statistical angle on what I have been feeling in my bones and fighting for twenty years. The 1960s burst into the quiet serenity of the post-war Eisenhower years like an earthquake. Everything that was settled seemed to come loose. Gender roles, feminism, an unpopular war in Vietnam, Civil Rights, campus protests - bumper stickers advocating "Question Authority," drugs and, of course, sex. Attitudes about pre-marital sex essentially turned over in the decade of the sixties - particularly among young people. Previously 80% or so believed premarital sex was always wrong, to pretty much the reverse - 70 to 80% believing there was nothing morally wrong.

That's huge, Putnam says. And so there was a reaction, an aftershock - a strong renewal of conservative evangelical religion that held onto and held up traditional values. It transformed into the Religious Right and when politicians understood the political potential of a movement like that - the culture war began - a political religion, or religious politics, that was judgmental, absolutely sure of itself and occasionally mean.

Then came a second aftershock. Young people, dismayed at what they were hearing from the Religious Right, simply walked out, in droves - and have not returned. The religion they saw on television, the religion the

media was most interested in, was judgmental, harsh, mean and irrelevant to the world they were living in and trying to make sense of. They are not atheists, Putnam says. They believe in God, read religious literature, some pray. But they don't go to church.

We have to find a way to get past this. It's not only dividing us from one another, it's splitting denominations and congregations while a generation of young people - still religious, still spiritual, still deeply concerned about freedom and the quality of life for their kids, and education and immigration, and equal rights for all - still hungry for good news, a whole generation is in that process of giving up on religion altogether and recreating the religious landscape in which the third largest cohort is "none."

So whatever emerges out of this rummage sale or whatever it is - will have gotten past this thing, and will, I pray to God, be as shockingly inclusive as Jesus was that day he sat down at Levi the tax collector's table and broke bread with all those particular people his religion and his culture judged to be unclean, unfit. Do you remember that scene - early in each of the Synoptics? Do you remember who is standing out in the street, scandalized by this shockingly inclusive dinner party with Jesus in the middle of it? This cuts so close I don't even like to think about it.

But whatever church lives into the future will be one that is not so obsessive about getting its rules, traditions and doctrines right - as it is getting Jesus right when he sat down at that table.

And, I pray God that it will be a church that takes its unity half as seriously as Jesus did . . . "that they may be one - so that the world may believe that you sent me" he prayed.

We live in an unimaginably pluralistic nation, in a world that has brought us closer to one another, to people of different faiths, races, languages, cultures. We are aware, as never before, of neighbors of other faith traditions. We are both religiously devout and religiously diverse, Putnam says, and that is ordinarily a dangerous and sometimes explosive mix. Not here, Putnam says, because we are so diverse almost everybody loves or is related to a person of another faith.

Hans Küng said the new ecumenism must be interfaith. We need a new openness to one another, to truth bigger than anyone's exclusive truth. And it is my deep conviction that we cannot do that very well apart from our own unity as God's Christian people, God's Christian Children.

The unity of the church, the ecumenical vision - which you here this afternoon - embody, is not a liberal add on to the gospel - it is at the heart of the gospel. It is an evangelical imperative - "that they may be one so that the world may believe." In a radically global, pluralistic world, we have no credibility at all without unity.

Cynthia Wedel, former President of the National Council of Churches, wrote- for *The Christian Century*- "That God finds the disunity of (the) his church distressing seems obvious, and that he is pushing and pulling us toward greater unity is clear."

What the world sees of religion is mostly disgraceful. So, dear friends, do not let go of the vision - the hope - which we believe is in the heart of God - of the unity of the church.

Was there ever a more poignant plea than this, written from a prison cell:

"I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Paul's thoughts, in prison, had taken wing, and had begun to soar. In Christ God has started a new humanity, with a plan to heal divisions, break down walls of hostility, a plan to unite all things. As he sits there in his filthy jail cell, he says "He is our peace." In him God means to bring together the whole human race.

Marcus Barth said "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit" is much, much too mild. It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency in the Greek word - passion-full effort, physical as well as emotional and spiritual. Do it! Do it now! Take pains to do it! Do whatever it takes to get it done!

As you do the important work before you, as you look backward and forward, do not let go of that beautiful, ecumenical vision and hope.